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ABSTRACT

The General Motors Institute (GMI), a wholly owned subsidiary of the General Motors Corporation, was created to provide leaders for its parent organization. GMI is a fully accredited undergraduate college that offers degrees in industrial, electrical, and mechanical engineering and in industrial administration. Since people in business and industrial organizations must communicate well in order for their organizations to function effectively, GMI places great emphasis on teaching communication skills. One typical course, Written and Oral Communication II, teaches speaking skills; it also teaches writing as a functional, utilitarian skill. Students are taught to keep in mind the readership and the intended use of each report they write, as they plan and write each part of it: preface, introduction, development, and conclusion. The course avoids a rigid taxonomic approach, in which all industrial writing is divided into categories such as reports, letters, memos, and proposals. Technical writing is taught as the designing of pieces of writing to meet the needs of specific situations. (GW)

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND THE ERIC SYSTEM CONTRACTORS."

THE ADVANCED COMPOSITION COURSE AT GMI

presented to
1977 Conference on College Composition and Communication

by

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General Motors Institute
Flint, Michigan

The purpose of my talk today is to tell you something about the advanced composition course at General Motors Institute, the place where I teach. I have been teaching there for over 25 years, mostly as a teacher of technical writing. I am not sure what this term means to you, and so I thought I would cover five particular points with respect to it, in hopes that I can bring out the meaning I have in mind and thus share more fully with you my thoughts on the subject. Since I have only 15 minutes to speak, however, I shall necessarily be brief; my concern will be with a broad overview rather than with specifics.

Here is what I would like to do:

1. To say something about the 20th century as it concerns people and the organizations in which they are grouped.
2. To point up the relationship of the General Motors Corporation to this organizational world.
3. To point up the relationship of General Motors Institute to the General Motors Corporation.
4. To identify and illustrate the core idea of the advanced composition course at GMI.
5. To abstract from the first four points something about technical writing in general.

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I. The Organizational World

I begin with a major sociological fact of the 20th century. It is that we, all of us, are becoming increasingly dependent on one another for earning a living. The clothes we wear, the food we eat, the books we read--all have been brought into being for us by others. Perhaps there was an earlier day, say the 19th century, when it was possible for a person to do all of these things for himself. In fact, most people were farmers and did support themselves. And for those who were caught up in urban life and couldn't make a living, well, they could always go back to the farm. They could also homestead. Indeed, it was up until last month that a person in the U.S.A. could homestead if all else didn't pan out. But now I am informed by the Wall Street Journal that the Homestead Act has been dropped from the books, so that avenue of independence has now, and presumably forever, been shut off.

The fact is that all of us have to sell our services to earn a living. In your case, you do it through an organization of people called a college; in my case, I do it through an industrial organization called General Motors. I will say categorically that there is no one in this audience who is as fortunate as the Kennedy kids were. I understand that each one was given a million dollars at the age of 21 so that he-she could thumb his-her nose at the world and call their respective souls their own. So there are the exceptions.

But I am talking about people who must work for a living in organizations. The word "organizations," however, is a broad one, so for our purpose here I shall confine it to industrial and business organizations. We are immediately confronted with a fact of life: that if these

organizations are to function effectively, the people who comprise these organizations will have to communicate effectively. This means that they are going to have to speak well and write well, and to the extent they do so, such organizations will be healthy. Conversely, if they can't communicate effectively, the orgahizations will probably be deficient. I am thinking of communication in its broadest sense here--of clear thinking and a concern for others. So we have two points:

1. Communication is intimately bound up in organizational activity.

2. Our students will be running these organizations some day, for they too will have to earn a living. Hence they have got to be good communicators.

3. Tom Sawyer's article in our February journal is apropos here. Tom has entitled it "Why Speech Will Not Totally Replace Writing," and thus he has epitomized what I am trying to say--that there is this ever-growing demand for writing skills. Tom also says that the kind of writing needed is "instrumental or functional writing." But more of that later.

2. The General Motors Corporation

I have talked in very general terms thus far. Now I want to become more specific, first by commenting on the role of General Motors and then on the relationship of General Motors Institute to General Motors.

What is General Motors? It is an organization of people brought together for the purpose of providing basic transportation. It is a very large organization, employing over 600,000 people in many countries throughout the world. It is therefore a very complex organization, requiring a constant supply of capable young men and women who can provide the leadership necessary for the organization to function effectively. Thus enters General Motors Institute, the place where I work.

3. General Motors Institute

GMI is a wholly owned subsidiary of the General Motors Corporation. It is a fully accredited undergraduate college that operates on the cooperative plan, and it offers degrees in industrial, electrical, and mechanical engineering and in industrial administration. It has a present enrollment of 2000 students, all of whom are sponsored by the various plants and divisions of the Corporation.

I would like to clear up any preconceptions about GMI.

1. GMI is not a trade school. General Motors handles that kind of training in other ways.

2. GMI does not design cars or build cars. These functions are handled at the GM Technical Center and the various manufacturing divisions.

3. The graduates are not indentured servants. In fact about 200 of the graduates are presently working for the Ford Motor Car Company. One of them is a vice president, and another is a chief engineer.

I would like you to retain this conception: GMI has the assignment of providing leaders for the parent corporation. Therefore, there has always been much emphasis on our graduates being able to speak and to write well and, more generally, to understand what is meant by human communication in an organization.

It would be instructive to trace through the various ways that GMI has attempted to impart these skills, for the Institute is a microcosm of all that is represented by the term "technical writing programs." It has used every conceivable way of teaching technical writing. But the time is not available for me to elaborate. So I shall focus on our present F-40 course as a way of answering at least some of your questions.

4. F-40: Written and Oral Communication II

What, then, is F-40 all about? I shall skip the details and comment on just three points: the title, the basic idea of the course, and some of our do's and don'ts.

Title. The title of the course is Written and Oral Communication II. That is, it concerns both speaking and writing and is required of all seniors. Our convention, however, is concerned with only the written form of the language. Therefore, I will drop the oral part of the course from this talk, other than to say that writing and speaking are closely combined in industry and neither one should be slighted in instructing students.

But you may be critical of the redundancy in the title--for writing is communication, just as speech is communication. Therefore, to have a course called written and oral communication is to use bad English. I agree. But we selected this title with malice aforethought. We all know that it is possible to get a message around the world in less than a second. But we also know that it sometimes takes years to get that same message though a quarter-inch of human skull. Through the title, then, we are telling the students that it is not enough to write something. It takes more than that to communicate with people in industry.

This means that our job is to make the students better communicators.

Basic Idea of the Course. How do we go about making them better communicators? We are now at the immediate subject of my talk. (Some people would say the eye of the storm.) The basic idea of the course is simple enough: there are certain major variables in any given writing situation and there are certain functional parts of a report at the

writer's disposal. What he does is to think through these variables--the reader, the subject matter, himself, and the intended use of his report--and then he asks himself certain questions about each of the functional parts--prefatory material, introductory material, developing material, and concluding material. If he does so effectively, then he should come out with a piece of writing (report, letter, memo, etc.) that will accomplish its intended purpose. Let's take two examples:

Example 1

Writing a problem-centered, investigational report that is of sufficient importance that it will move up through different administrative levels of the organization.

Let's roleplay. Suppose you are a researcher and have come up with a revolutionary internal-combustion engine--no pollutants, no dependence on oil, and cheap to make. I am sure that everyone concerned would be interested in your report. You would also have some doubting Thomases and some supervisors who wouldn't have the time or the knowledge to sit down and read the entire report. Yet these may be the very readers who would have to pass final judgment on the conclusions and recommendations.

So how to organize this report? Well, you would need to have:

prefatory material--quite a bit of it

introduction--a full-blown one with an explicit statement of the problem

developing material--a total analysis of the subject

concluding material--it, in the form of findings, conclusions, and recommendations, summed up and placed at the front of the report, so that the busy reader can get the results of the study quickly

The report would also be replete with such supplementary matters as illustrations and bibliographic references. But the point is that if you have handled these functional parts well, you should have a good report. I am assuming, of course, that the language itself is well handled.

Example 2

Let's continue with the roleplaying. Suppose you are still this researcher and your immediate boss wants to be kept apprised of developments concerning this ongoing project. Suppose, too, he is the only reader and knows quite a bit of what is going on.

So how to organize this report effectively?

The whole report might reduce to one page and be called a progress report. More specifically, all of the functional parts would be reduced to a bare minimum.

prefatory material--to one sentence: "Here is the report you asked me to turn in."

introductory material--to a short statement of purpose: "In this report I cover two points: what has been done thus far, and what remains to be done."

developing material--to a paragraph for each point

concluding material--to nothing at all

In other words, these two examples illustrate that one DESIGNS a report to meet the needs of the readers. In this sense, a report is simply a tool to get a job done in industry. This is utilitarian, instrumental (to use Tom Sawyer's word), functional writing: if a report is functional, it's a good piece of writing.[1] I take for granted, of course, that the tone of the writing is observant of good human relationships.

Let's try just one more example to point up this word "design." Suppose you had to write a report for your college, and the topic the teaching of composition. How would you go about it? You would have to design the report. And the same holds true in industry for any piece of writing that cannot be handled by a form (which of itself has to be designed). Each has to be designed to meet the needs of the writing situation.

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[1]Thomas A. Sawyer, "Why Speech Will Not Totally Replace Writing," College Composition and Communication, February 1977. See also Robert E.

And so at GMI we use design as the approach to teaching F-40 Written and Oral Communication II.

In contrast, here are some of the things we don't do. I shall be brief.

F-40 is not a literature-oriented course. We don't believe that reading Antigone, Hamlet, Tom Jones and so on will magically turn the students into good reporters. For that matter, we don't base the course on the writing in, say, Scientific American or Fortune. As admirably written as they are, they are peripheral to the main purpose of developing report-writing skills. Essays and works of fiction are one thing, and reports are another.

We don't burden the course with a lot of behavioral theory about what it is that makes people "tick" in an organization. This, however, is an overstatement, for writing is behavior. But it is a matter of emphasis. It is one thing to lecture at length on, say, cognitive dissonance or Maslow's theory of needs and another thing to work it in indirectly and incidentally. The emphasis is on writing per se and not on human behavior or applied psychology.

It is not a course in drilling the student on the intricacies of the sentence or paragraph, or on punctuation and mechanics. These things can be worked in as is necessary and as time permits. But the students in F-40 are upperclassmen and presumed to be relatively competent in general composition.

We avoid a rigid taxonomic approach to report writing. That is to say, to assume that all writing in industry falls into four categories--reports, letters, memos, and proposals--and that for each category there

is a standard writing formula is to assume erroneously. Nothing could be further from the truth, and to teach categories mechanically is to mislead the student. Heraclitus is our model and mentor here, not Aristotle.

Many books, voluminous and scholarly, have been based on such approaches to technical writing and thus are falsely oriented. They don't at all square with what actually goes on in industry.

5. Concluding Remarks

I come now to my final point, and that is to make some concluding remarks that may have relevance to your own colleges. In March 1972, College English had an article titled "The Varieties of Freshman English." The author, Thomas Wilcox, made this statement.

> "The ideal program which teachers and administrators (and textbook publishers) have sought for fifty years has not yet emerged, and the debate over freshman English continues much as before." (p. 686)

One of the reasons for this endless debate, I suspect, is that there are so many variables involved in the teaching of general composition that it is impossible to lay down the precise nature of such a course and exactly how it should be taught. By the same token, there seems to be much confusion about a course in technical writing. Other than that such a course has vaguely something to do with writing a laboratory report or describing a mechanism or answering a letter of complaint, there does not seem to be a conceptual understanding that is shared by one and all in the field.

In contrast, take the beginning course in psychology. I will use myself as an example. I teach the course, and I don't think I would have trouble with my colleagues in teaching that course in any college in the country. There are the standard topics--human development, learning and problem solving, personality theory, behavioral disorders, social psychology, and the rest. Likewise, the textbooks deviate only within limits.

But if I were to teach technical writing at three different schools--a community college, a four-year undergraduate college, and a graduate school--would I be able to do so without difficulty? Or would I be dealing with so many variables that I would have to devise three radically different approaches for the three schools in question?

Certainly I would have to allow for differences in verbal abilities of the students, their cultural backgrounds, their career aspirations, and so on. Nonetheless, I would still teach them all alike in this respect: that in industry one designs a piece of writing.

Therefore, if you want your students to become more proficient in writing something in this world of organizations we are all caught up in, give them some practice at design. I don't care what the writing situation is, or how complex or simple you set it up, make them organize and write to meet the needs of that specific situation. There are no pat formulas.

Thank you for the opportunity to share my ideas with you.